

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGER ROUNDTABLE  
WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL MICHAEL J. WALSH,  
COMMANDING GENERAL, U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS  
GULF REGION DIVISION

TOPIC: STATUS OF CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS IN IRAQ

LOCATION: BAGHDAD, IRAQ

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STAFF: So, General, do you have any opening remarks?

GEN. WALSH: Yes. I certainly want to tell everybody I appreciate the opportunity to be able to talk to them today about the ongoing construction missions that we have going on here. Certainly the effort is extraordinarily challenging. I've been an Army engineer now for 29 years, and the work here in Iraq is probably the most complex environment that I've ever worked in before. But I'd also like to say, from an Army engineer perspective, there's not a better place where I'd rather be than be here to rebuild the infrastructure of an entire country. That's something that's quite challenging and something that engineers would like to do.

To date, the United States has contributed \$22 billion towards Iraq's rebuilding efforts, an effort that was estimated by the World Bank to be about \$80 billion back in 2004. So we think that's a little bit more. And the U.S. taxpayers' contribution to that of \$20 billion was really just to jump-start the rebuilding efforts here in the country of Iraq. We're coming in mostly to work the wholesale work: putting in the large generators, working the sewer systems and the water, and put the oil systems back together, but again, just a jump-start, and that was supposed to be followed by donor nations and the government of Iraq funds, which we're still working on with the Iraqi government so that they can -- they just put their budget into effect and sending that down to the provincial ministers as well as the ministers of oil, electricity and the others.

Every day in Iraq we see successes of the U.S. government construction program here. We see better essential services in many places where there was none. And a quote that I continue to use is that 75 percent of the country here in Iraq has twice as much electrical power as it did before the war.

One of the items that I continue talking to our Americans is that many of the services that we take for granted back in the U.S. -- or what I'm working on is trying to get the Iraqi people access to medical facilities, fire stations, you know, to school in the neighborhood, paved roads, clean water. And so that's what we're working on.

So we've set goals and we're tracking to meet those goals. For example, the requirement for me is to work on 10,000 -- correction, 1,045 school projects have been planned countrywide, and I've completed 976. We completed 154 border posts. We've completed 92 of the 97 fire stations, and 32 of the 34 post offices, and 93 of the 102 railroad stations. In addition, we've refurbished or rebuilt, added to the electrical grid about 2,800 megawatts. And we're working to help the Iraqis get to 3 million barrels a day in their oil industry.

So with that, I'd just like to have that as my opening comment, and to thank you all personally to help me get the message to our American population that the funds that they've contributed to the people here in Iraq is going into good places.

STAFF: All right, sir.

Austin Bay, do you have a question for General --

Q Oh, I get to go first, huh? All right. Yes, sir. I served in Iraq in 2004. I was on Multinational Corps Iraq in a plan section. And one of the issues that came up was border posts. And that was -- I want to say we first -- I first encountered that as an issue in June of 2004. I have tried to track that something at a distance after returning to the States.

Now, here is one of the issues that we had of several with border posts, and I'm curious to hear an engineer comment on it, and that was power support, as in electrical power support for these border posts. One of the issues was diesel generators because they had to have their own support system, and then you had, of course, to truck the diesel out there and you had all the logistics issues involved with the diesel.

I have seen a proposal floated about using photovoltaic or some sort of solar power to help with those border posts. And some of them are in pretty darn obscure, hard-to-get-to places. Is this, without sounding too green -- and I don't mean to be joking about that. I'm very serious at looking at how to get a distributed power out to these posts.

Have you looked at solar power or alternative energies to help power those border posts? I don't want this to be too off the wall a question, but I tell you, it was a real issue when we were looking at it in 2004.

(No response from the General as the connection is lost.)

STAFF: Jack?

STAFF: Yes?

STAFF: Stand by for General Walsh again.

STAFF: All right. Okay.

Q Hey Jack, this is Andrew Rubin (sp). I'm on.

STAFF: All right, sir.

Victoria, was that you I heard also?

Q Yes.

STAFF: Okay.

Q How many people do we have on for questions?

STAFF: One, two, three, four, five right now. We've got Colonel Bay, Mark Finklestein (sp), Charlie -- (inaudible), Andrew Lubin (sp), Victoria Coates (sp).

Anybody else on line?

GEN. WALSH: Yeah, General Walsh. Just got back. How you doing, Andrew? And sorry, Austin, I didn't hang up on you on solar power.

Q No problem. The question -- if I can refine it -- and I was shooting it off the top of my head. The question is, is that those posts are distributed in sometimes hard-to-get places. You've got a logistics tail to support them, and if we're not doing it, the Iraqis are going to have that logistics tail. It's been running this off of diesel. But that's more trucks out in the road, more trouble. I wondered if you had looked at some alternative energy sources for them? If you hadn't, does that interest you? And then if you would talk a little bit about some of the challenges in putting in the border posts.

GEN. WALSH: Well, I haven't looked at solar power as an alternative to providing light and heat and how to run their computers and everything else. And I haven't been keeping up to date on solar cells and power, but I remember putting them in for some of our installations back in the United States. I'm thinking of Fort Stewart right now. And we had solar power heating. That was back in the '90s. And that didn't work out too well.

I'm not sure we're advanced along enough where we could run an entire border fort by itself with solar power.

We're experimenting a little bit -- in actuality, we bought 470 solar-power lights that we're going to put here in the city of Baghdad to help light the streets when the main grid goes down. And we're going to use that as an experiment. We'll see how the solar-power lights go.

As I think back, I'm not aware of any other city that runs only on solar-power lights. So I'm kind of interested to see if this is going to work. It's a large capital front-end expense that would be capitalized over years. And if you can keep the solar-power lights up and running for a number of years, it would cross over the cost-benefit ratio. But I'm really looking at really going to start putting those up this month, and we'll put a four-month study in and see if it's a useful idea.

Q Could I get a copy of that when it comes out?

GEN. WALSH: You bet.

Q I'd like that.

GEN. WALSH: All right.

The key items that we have with the border forts is exactly what you said. They're isolated. I was up in Sulimaniyah, in the border fort up there, and when there's snow up in the passage -- (audio break) --

Q Uh-oh.

STAFF: Uh-oh.

Q Remember, Jack, that we were talking about comm yesterday? Boy, Baghdad is even worse.

STAFF: Yeah. It -- we've had some pretty good success with comms over there lately. I'm not sure what the answer is --

Q Well, he was just going to get -- yeah, I hope he'll finish that answer, because he was going to get to what -- the issue with this. And these are absolutely critical if you want to try to stop -- down infiltration.

STAFF: Right. And --

Q We lose a lot of guys on convoy duty. You put some solar power, you send less up there.

STAFF: Oh, yeah. That's -- I mean, that's why it's really a --

STAFF: Jack, this is Andrew again.

STAFF: Yeah. Okay.

STAFF: Stand by.

STAFF: All right.

STAFF: It is Walsh back on.

STAFF: Well, would you pick it up with the snow in the passes, sir?

GEN. WALSH: Yeah. The snow in the passes and isolated and with the range and stuff, he's just having hard time getting food and fuel, and just, you know, supplying his border fort is a tough logistical challenge in and of itself.

STAFF: Okay.

Q Okay.

Q Can I go ahead? Do we just jump in? How do these work?

STAFF: Well, let's see. Andrew, is that you?

Q Yes, it is.

STAFF: Yeah. Why don't you go ahead?

Q Great.

General, Andrew Lubin (sp). How are you, sir?

GEN. WALSH: How you doing, Andrew? Glad you made it home.

Q Good. I appreciate it. Going to be back after a couple weeks.

General, the news in the States talks about Baghdad, Baghdad, Baghdad. What's happening with ACE in the rest of the provinces, say, Anbar, which I still think is equally important to the effort over there? Can you talk about ACE's effort in Anbar province?

GEN. WALSH: Right. We've got -- the Corps of Engineers is pretty much throughout the country, as far north as Dohuk, as far south as Basra and as far west as Hit, and on the Iranian border.

What we're doing out at Al Anbar -- we've got some construction work that's ongoing in Fallujah and Ramadi. I know that you've been out there, and you've seen the water treatment plant and the sewer systems that we've got going on in Fallujah and the water systems that we have going on in Ramadi.

So our projects are pretty much throughout the country. Certainly up in the north we have -- Erbil -- a water treatment plant, which is bringing on about 4,000 liters per hour to supply fresh water for the city of Erbil, of just about 950,000.

In addition, down in the south in Basra, we're putting together the Basra Children's Hospital, which will be the first hospital built in Iraq since 1986. So we're kind of throughout the country trying to provide services to the Iraqi people.

Q With the -- can I do a follow-on, folks?

STAFF: Sure.

Q Okay, great. With the security situation in Anbar, how is it with your projects -- how is it going? I mean, are you able to continue these or are the insurgents trying to -- are they successful in driving the workers off the projects?

GEN. WALSH: Well, it's both. It's certainly extraordinarily complex. Some days we can get to the project sites, and sometimes the contractors can't, and they can't because of insurgency actions and sometimes it's because of coalition checkpoints and things like that as they try to get to work. And sometimes they do. So it changes as the security situation changes. I -- you know, we're waiting for the Baghdad operation to continue, recapture the security issues here in the city and can -- while that's ongoing, we're still working the more than 200 projects that are here in Baghdad. So it goes day by day as we can get to the project sites.

Q Great, thank you.

STAFF: And, Charlie, if you have a question.

Q Sorry. Yes. My question deals with -- what's the borderline between the activities that you do and the things the State Department does? You build the infrastructure, and then they come in and help establish commercial enterprises? Or where's the borderline, the handoff between the two organizations?

GEN. WALSH: Well, I really don't look at it from a borderline perspective. While a DOD entity working for General Petraeus, the funding that we had was the Iraq reconstruction funds. Congress had given that directly the office of the president, which was a little bit unusual, and so they -- the president gave that to the State Department for them to run. So the fundings that I had gotten for that reconstruction came through the State Department. So I work very closely with IRMO and Ambassador Salun (ph) and Ambassador Khalilzad and sit in in many of their meetings, working with USAID and General (retired) Rick Olson on putting together the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. So we're kind of blended all together. As I finish up the reconstruction piece, USAID will be working alongside me, giving out microloans and working to get the economy jump-started while the PRTs are working with the provincial government trying to see what new projects that they would like constructed.

Q Okay, thanks.

STAFF: Okay. General, are you still with us?

STAFF: Jack, it sounds like he fell off the line again.

STAFF: Yeah -- okay. Let's see what --

STAFF: Jack, you got to get him a SPAWAR line. Those things work pretty good over there.

STAFF: Yeah. (Laughs.) Well, when he comes back on, we'll go with Victoria next, and then, Mark --

Q Thank you.

STAFF: -- follow up with your question, and we'll see how much time we've got left.

Q Well, Jack, if we have a couple of minutes left, I'd like to hear him talk about water projects a little bit.

STAFF: Okay.

Q But that's --

STAFF: All right.

Q All right -- if there's time.

STAFF: Okay, there should be. I think we're looking good on time, as long as we can keep him on the line.

Q And I'd like to ask him one, too, if you get a chance. The system was pretty screwed up --

STAFF: Jack?

STAFF: Yes.

STAFF: You're going to get me fired, man. (Laughter.) I'm going to pass you back to General Walsh, and I want to tell you that he's not responsible for the phone lines in Iraq as a part of reconstruction. (Laughter.) Hold on one second.

Q That's the Iraqi end of it.

STAFF: All right.

GEN. WALSH: Hey, Jack, I'm back.

STAFF: All right, sir.

Okay, Victoria.

Q General Walsh, this is Victoria Coates with Red State.

You had mentioned the -- improving the oil production, and I was wondering if you had any thoughts about how the draft oil distribution law that was approved by the Iraqi cabinet this week will contribute to your ongoing reconstruction effort.

GEN. WALSH: Well, that's more on the political side. And I know, listening to a lot of the conversations, getting the hydrocarbon law is very significant, and probably one of the premier pieces that should go through the council of representatives, and hopefully that will get passed. I think from that it will allow a lot of -- what I've heard is that it will allow a lot of private funds come into the country and help continue jump-start the oil program here.

Q Thank you.

STAFF: Okay, and Mark Finkelstein.

Q Good morning, General, and thank you very much. I want to start just by thanking GRD for their efforts and for the opportunities that they provided when I was in Iraq in November. Tommy Clarkson provided the opportunity for me to meet with the head of each of your various GRD sectors and got us out to a couple of sites in Baghdad. And since I've been back, Tom O'Hara has been very helpful in providing information very promptly on a number of different questions that I've had.

At Newsbusters, our focus is what we see as liberal bias in the media. And I did a quick Google search of items regarding reconstruction just this morning before we came on, and I found a column by Dan Rather entitled "Iraq: Free Fraud Zone." And he's focusing on what he claims to be rampant fraud in the reconstruction efforts. And I wonder if you could, just in general or as specific terms as you like, respond to the efforts that GRD undertakes to ensure that fraud is brought under control.

GEN. WALSH: Well, we certainly have our own internal review: people who go out and do inspections and make sure that we have good management controls and internal controls that are in place. In addition to that, we have -- the Army Audit Agency comes out and does audits, the General Accounting Office has been out doing audits, and then we have the special --

(Disconnected.)

STAFF: All right, sounds like we lost him again.



Q When the general comes back, I had hoped -- I'd like to --

STAFF: And are we back? Okay.

What was that, Mark?

Q I was saying that when the general comes back, I'd like to invite him to respond to the broad point that -- that Rather is making.

STAFF: All right.

STAFF: Sir, General Walsh is back.

GEN. WALSH: Yes, Mark, let me just get back to that question.

And then we have the Special IG for Iraq Reconstruction, the SIGIR. And the key item that I want to bring up there is they come out and do a lot of inspections, and what was in the last quarter report is about 90 percent of the projects that they have inspected have met standards. So when I hear, you know, accusations like that, I just go to all of those inspector general reports and talk with them, and they give me a different flavor that's out there.

Q Has Dan Rather ever been in touch with GRD to get some of this information on his own, to your knowledge?

GEN. WALSH: Not to my knowledge.

Q Okay. Thank you.

STAFF: Okay. Have we got everybody? Okay, any follow-on questions?

Q Yeah. I'd like to -- General Walsh?

GEN. WALSH: Yes, sir.

Q This is Austin Bay. I would like to ask you about some of the water projects that you're involved in. And a brief set-up. July 2004, a lieutenant colonel running an engineer battalion in southwest Baghdad told me that he would be the most popular man in Baghdad if he could get the toilets to flush. And there was a lot more to it than getting the toilets to flush. I wonder what kind of progress have we made on sewage? And I had the mayor of Najaf say that he needed clean water more than anything else in his town.

What kind of progress have we made in the last three years, and what do you see us doing in the next six to 12 months in terms of water projects?

GEN. WALSH: Water projects, as you just mentioned, are one of the key projects that we have been -- key areas that we have been working on. I think -- and I don't have the numbers directly in front of me, but we had about \$4 billion, maybe it was \$3 billion, that we had put into the water sector. So far we've completed over 500 projects of the 800 water projects that we had planned, and those include 480 water treatment plants and sewer projects, and certainly the ones that we're working here in Baghdad and over in R-3, Sadr City, is one of the important ones as well.

Every time I talk with the mayor here in Baghdad, in the Amanat, that's one of the key items that they ask us to do, is they need some more water treatment plants so that they can treat the water before they put it back into the rivers. And we're working pretty hard -- pretty close with them as we can do that, both with the funds that the American population gave us but also help them use the government of Iraq funds as well.

So I think nationwide we have about 700,000 cubic meters a day of water treatment capacity that's either under construction or completed at this point. And in the water sector we employ about 2,000 Iraqi citizens every day in the water sector.

Q You did what -- with about 2,000 -- I'm sorry, I missed that.

GEN. WALSH: We have about -- we employ about 2,000 Iraqis in the water sector as well every day trying to do the construction work and do the maintenance of it. So it's not only the construction projects in and of itself, but it's giving men and women a good-paying job where they can use those funds to take care of their family.

STAFF: All right, we've got just a couple of minutes left.

Q Can I sneak in for one?

General, Andrew Lubin (sp) again. Sometimes there's no context here. What did you inherit? With what you're doing now, how far have you come since 2003?

GEN. WALSH: Well, that's a good question. And one of the biggest questions I get while I'm here is electricity, is why -- you know, why did we put so much money and not get enough electricity into Iraq. And I just want to put the context out that most of the country had two to four hours of power a day, whereas Baghdad had 18 to 22 hours of power. All the power that was generated was coming into the central part of the government into the country.

We now have about -- the national average is 12 hours of power. And, heck, I was flying into Baghdad just the other day from Basra and it was about 9:00 at night and it was fairly well lit up. And I don't think we were on grid power then. A lot of people have their own generators. So people are making do with the amount of power that we do have.

Certainly the oil industry, just right after the war, had less than half of a million (sic) barrels, 500 million barrels a day, and now they're up to just under 3 million (sic) barrels a day. We're about 2.5 million (sic) barrels a day. We've put in 900 schools, renovated 24 hospitals. So we've been really improving the services to the normal Iraqi folks.

But a lot of people back in the United States think, you know, they have eight hours of power, you know, that's terrible, but if you go out to Al Anbar, that's double, in some cases triple the amount of power that they had postwar.

STAFF (?): Prewar.

Q Great. Thank you.

STAFF: Okay. General, any closing comments?

Q I just have one more question. This is Mark Finkelstein. Looking back to the future, what is the future for GRD in Iraq? Are we coming to the end of our appropriation cycle? Will there be additional funding coming down the line for new projects? Can you talk to the future a bit, General, please?

GEN. WALSH: Well, right now we've executed about \$8.5 billion and we have three and a half left to go. So I've got enough work to keep me going for another year and a half. There is some additional funds, not so much coming down in large infrastructure projects. A lot of them have to do with the essential services working with the State Department on how to put some infrastructure protection systems together, and also funds that are going out to the provinces and the provinces are asking to do some smaller projects. And we're working with the State Department to get those done.

So I don't see a continuation of large projects using the U.S. taxpayers' funds, but we are working with the Iraqi government, with something like Foreign Military Sales type of apparatus, where we can use Iraqi funds to help with the reconstruction if they so choose to use those. But we're looking to finishing up the work in another 18 months unless we get additional work from the Iraqi government.

Q Very good. And best wishes with that. Thank you.

GEN. WALSH: Thank you.

And I'd just like to end by thanking each and every one of you in helping me get the word out to the American people on what's really happening here on the ground. Certainly this is an ancient land, it's been here for years, but it's a new country. They're still trying to figure out what it's like to be a new Iraqi and trying to figure out how to -- the ministries are trying to figure out how to provide services to their people. So this is an exciting time to be here, not only as an engineer but also watching the seeds of democracy grow.

STAFF: All right. Very good. Thank you very much, General, for spending time with us and your input. And good luck to you in the future, and hopefully we can do this again soon.

GEN. WALSH: You bet. Thank y'all.

Q General, thank you.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you a lot, Jack.

STAFF: Okay. You bet.

Q Jack, appreciate it.

Q Jack --

STAFF: Yes?

Q I was just saying thank you.

STAFF: Oh, you're welcome. All right. If anybody had any follow-up questions or anything, just send them to me, and I'll forward them on.

Q Great.

Q Jack, thank you for the opportunity.

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